

LOU BARLETTA
11TH DISTRICT, PENNSYLVANIA

**TRANSPORTATION AND
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Congress of the United States
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Governor Thomas W. Wolf
225 Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120-0062

Dear Governor Wolf:

I write today regarding your administration's announcement that two of five state correctional institutes (SCI) may be closed. During a visit to my Washington, D.C. office, your Secretary of Corrections, John Wetzel, indicated that three of the five prisons under consideration are located in Northeast Pennsylvania. Two of these, SCI-Frackville and SCI-Waymart, are located outside of my Congressional District but employ approximately 80 of my constituents. I have the privilege of representing the men and women who work at SCI-Retreat, which is located in Luzerne County, and employs approximately 400 individuals. I respectfully urge you to delay the announcement of any potential closures until critical information may be gathered through public hearings before disrupting the lives of so many families.

I recognize that it is your decision, and yours alone, to open or close state prisons, and that my ability, as a federal representative, to influence your choices are limited. That being said, as an advocate for my constituents, I raise several concerns that I believe must be publicly answered before any facility closures are announced.

The announcement of the potential closures was made on Friday, January 6, 2017, and indicated that a final announcement would be made within 13 business days. I respectfully question how this compressed timetable will allow your administration to fully vet the impact that the closures will have. As you know, this decision will greatly impact the regional economy and officer safety, and even inmate safety.

The notice of potential closures was entitled "Department of Corrections Plans to Close Two State Prisons in Cost Cutting Measure." While I appreciate the budgetary constraints you face and the idea that government should look for the best deal for taxpayers, I believe that this headline demonstrates our fundamentally different point of view about the role of prison management. I believe that prisons, and, for that manner, halfway houses, should be managed in a way that keeps our communities safe. We shouldn't be closing prisons simply to save money -- these facilities should be closed when we have addressed the underlying criminal element so the need for the location no longer exists.

It is also important that any closure does not harm the prison guards charged with protecting the public from violent or mentally ill prisoners. Officer safety must be taken into account. The announcement noted that prisoners may be shifted to unused beds at SCI-Camp Hill, which, while physically located just outside of my Congressional District, employs a number of my constituents. As you know, 27 years ago, overcrowding at SCI-Camp Hill led to 3 days of rioting that destroyed half the prison and injured

123 people, including 69 staff members, 41 inmates, and 7 first responders. Given this history, a full public hearing and comment period should be held before any announcement is made.

I have also been informed that the Department of Corrections recently changed capacity levels from operational capacity, which was the standard in December, to emergency capacity, with little prior notice. My understanding is that this means a prison can place beds in common areas, gymnasiums, and any space that is open. This change can obviously result in great harm to correctional officers, but also has the potential to put inmates themselves at risk. This invites lawsuits from inmates that would negate any potential cost savings from prison closures. I understand that a significant number of prisoners at SCI-Retreat are classified as mentally ill, which means they are provided with specialized care. The rapid movement of inmates to other prisons without a full vetting seems problematic. Further, if one were to use the safer operational capacity metric, SCI-Retreat is one inmate away from capacity. This is yet another topic that should be examined before any closure announcement.

Further, the district attorneys in both the Northern and Southern end of my district note that the movement of inmates will impact the local court systems, and that these concerns must be addressed.

For example, Luzerne County District Attorney Stefanie Salavantis has noted that the county prison system is overcrowded, and that SCI-Retreat provides an important service by absorbing prisoners that can't be housed by the county. Luzerne has over 1,000 cases with inmates that may be added to our local prison population, and I have not been made aware of any communication that indicates that the Department of Corrections is taking this into account when considering inmate population numbers. In the Southern part of my district, Cumberland County District Attorney David Freed has noted that the addition of 1,000 inmates to his jurisdiction will invariably strain the local court system. One criminal case against an inmate will divert a prosecutor's attention away from other cases, as these types of cases typically take about a week of court time. These concerns are yet another reason why your announcing of prison closures should go through a thorough public comment period before any decision is made.

Further, given that the announcement of closures indicated that the primary driver is economics, I urge you to fully consider the economic implications of prison closures on local communities before a decision is made, as saving funding in one area of your budget may cause unintended strains in other areas.

For example, closing SCI-Retreat would immediately move Newport Township from a first class city to a second class city, impacting numerous services to the area. During a recent meeting with John Yudichak and Gerry Mullery, Greater Nanticoke Area School Superintendent Ronald Grevera noted that the closure could lead to the loss of 90 families and 200 students, and that such a large loss of families cannot be absorbed by the district at the same time that the second-largest employer in the district leaves. Senator Yudichak further noted that closing SCI-Retreat will jeopardize \$1.6 million in funding for the school district, which would threaten important educational programs like Pre-K instruction for every student. This is an important issue that must be addressed, which is why a delay in your announcement is warranted.

Further, I have yet to receive information from your secretary of corrections, who asked for assistance in obtaining federal contracts as a way to supplement funding within the state corrections budget. Given what appears to be the lack of a pre-existing relationship in this area and a number of questions that must be answered before potential contracts can be considered, I urge you to delay any announcement on closures until these questions can be addressed.

Thank you for considering my concerns, and I appreciate your sending Secretary Wetzel to Washington, D.C. to brief me on the potential closures. I urge you to work with your partners in the state legislature, who have been making every attempt to engage the public to gather relevant information, before making any announcement on the status of these facilities.

Again, I urge you to delay any announcement of potential SCI closures until these numerous issues are publicly addressed. I am concerned that the rush to achieve immediate short term costs savings for one budget cycle by closing prisons may lead to further, unanticipated and more painful decisions down the road. As you know, closing a prison isn't a simple endeavor that can be easily reversed if capacity needs change. Your decision has an immediate impact on the safety of thousands of Pennsylvania prisoners, and the men and women who guard them, in addition to the local communities where they reside. Safety, not simply economics, must be publicly addressed to provide transparency to all involved. It therefore seems prudent to further study this issue and delay any decisions until these concerns can be addressed.

All my best,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lou Barletta". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Lou Barletta
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable John Yudichak
cc: The Honorable Gerald Mullery
cc: The Honorable Stefanie Salavantis
cc: The Honorable David Freed
cc: Mr. David Petri
cc: Mr. Don Williams